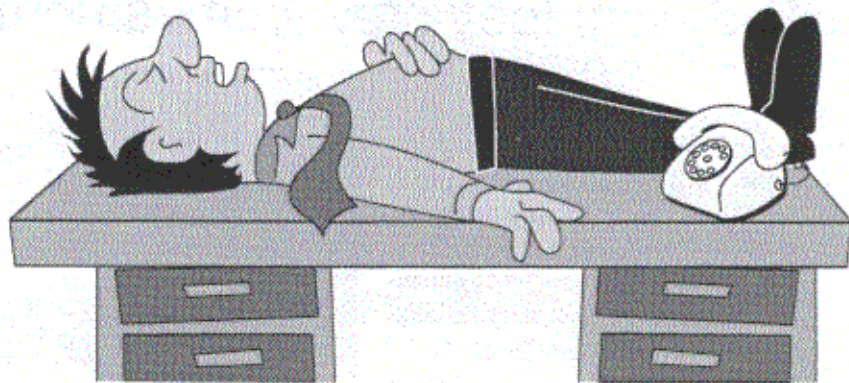


Health Watch:



Get a better night's sleep

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Sleep is a human need as basic as food and water. Enough sleep is essential for mental, emotional and physical health and well-being. Your body performs "restorative" work during sleep, allowing the body to replace old cells with new ones - re-energizing organs and muscles.

According to Capt. Jean Panagakos, MC, director of the sleep laboratory at National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, Md., most people think they can do with only four or five hours of sleep, but that is not enough.

Most healthy adults need an average of eight hours of sleep a night.

Inadequate sleep can lead to higher levels of stress, a shortened temper, slower reflexes, lower motivation, and an incapacity to concentrate effectively.

It impairs the ability to perform tasks involving memory, learning, and logical reasoning.

Lack of restful sleep may be caused by insomnia - a common, usually temporary inability to fall asleep or stay asleep.

Insomnia is not a disease, but a common and short-lived condition where the person is unable to get proper sleep despite their level of fatigue. About 60 percent of the adult population worldwide suffers from insomnia each year.

Insomnia can result from everyday stresses, environmental disturbances such as traffic noise, television and light,

uncomfortable room temperatures, erratic work hours, or air travel across time zones.

Overuse of stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine and alcohol, and even Internet addiction can lead to sleep disorders.

The most effective way to prevent and relieve insomnia is to take a non-drug, holistic approach to develop good sleeping habits. Here are some hints to help you get a better night's sleep:

- Be consistent with your sleep patterns. Establish a regular time for going to bed and getting up in the morning and try to stick with it on the weekends.

- Don't work, eat, read or watch television in bed. Try to associate the bedroom as the place solely for sleeping.

- The bed is not the place to hash over your daily problems or for accomplishing your "to do" list - try to clear your mind. Some people find that their daily worries play in their mind once they are in bed.

Capt. Panagakos suggests a preemptive approach. "Write down your worries and how you might manage them earlier in the day or evening before you go to bed," she suggests.

- If you don't fall asleep after 20 to 30 minutes, get up and leave the room to read or do some other relaxing activity.

- Avoid taking naps, particularly in the late afternoon.

- Light to moderate exercise before dinner can aid in your ability to sleep well,

as many people have a lower point in energy a few hours after exercise. Avoid heavy exercise near bedtime since it may have the opposite effect.

- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine, particularly in the afternoon.

- Avoid using alcohol. Many believe that alcohol will act as a sleep aid, but can actually fragment sleep patterns.

- Don't eat heavy meals close to bedtime - digestion raises metabolism and body temperature.

- Don't drink fluids before bedtime. The need to urinate may interrupt your sleep during the night.

- Keep the bedroom ventilated and cool, between 60-65 degrees.

Effects of a too hot or cold room may disturb your sleep. Short-term insomnia will most likely pass by making the above simple lifestyle changes.

However, if these changes don't work, the careful use of sleeping pills approved by the Food and Drug Administration may provide temporary relief from insomnia.

A physician can help choose appropriate medication to relieve insomnia, but medication should only be used as a short-term solution.

Insomnia that persists over a long period of time can be a symptom of another problem.

Chronic or recurrent insomnia might be a sign of an undiagnosed medical or psychological condition and you should seek the advice of your physician.